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Can the Russians Cheat on SALT?

The loss of American monitoring stations in Iran, an important source of intelligence on Russian missile tests, gives new urgency to an old fear: Can the United States be sure the Soviets won't cheat on arms limitations? The problem of verification already looms as a controversy within the larger controversy about the still unfinished arms treaty, SALT II.

Public discussion of this subject must be conducted somewhat in the dark. The capabilities of American monitoring devices — the satellites, radars, radio receivers, cameras, ships and aircraft used to monitor Soviet activities — are among the most prized secrets of Government. President Carter's repeated assurances that verification will be "adequate," even without bases in Iran, are themselves not easily verified, nor are the claims of those who seem convinced that Russia will find a way to outwit our surveillance. Still, enough information about verification has leaked out over the years to permit some lay judgments.

The loss of Iran will have its most disruptive effect on the gathering of intelligence about a wide range of Soviet weapons programs — most of them not covered by SALT. It will impair but apparently not destroy American ability to verify compliance with SALT.

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SALT II would set several different kinds of weapons limitations. Limits on the total number of strategic launchers would be easily verifiable. Satellites in space can photograph all areas of the Soviet Union and can, from 100 miles up, distinguish among objects as small as 12 inches long. They can certainly spot and identify submarines, bombers or intercontinental ballistic missiles and cumulatively check their number with small margins of error.

Limits on the number of missiles equipped with multiple warheads will be harder to check — there is no way to look inside a missile from space. To handle that problem, the treaty itself provides a novel verification procedure. The Russians have agreed that every missile of a type ever tested with multiple warheads shall be counted as if in fact it carries multiple warheads — even if it doesn't. Thus, it will be crucial to monitor tests of multiple warheads. The lost stations in Iran, close to the Soviet test launch sites, used to help identify the type of missile being tested. But satellites also help in such identification. Moreover, monitoring stations near the Soviet test re-entry points, close to or in the Pacific Ocean, will continue to detect the use of multiple warheads in such missiles.

Probably the most significant verification problem left by the loss of the Iranian bases involves the treaty's limits on the testing and deployment of "new types" of missiles. The radars and radios in Iran were used to record a missile's performance characteristics. Equipment in Turkey or on planes, ships and satellites could provide some of the same information. But the Carter Administration will have to explain how precisely this distinction between new and old missiles is to be obtained in the future.

Iran aside, there are other verification problems posed by possible improvements in weapons. American analysts would find it difficult, for example, to detect any increase in the flight range of Soviet Backfire bombers or cruise missiles. For the foreseeable future, this uncertainty appears to be manageable. American satellites should be able to detect any significant increase in the production of Backfires. And the Soviets are thought to be years away from deployment of a long-range cruise missile.

In sum, while no agreement can be wholly cheatproof, American technical monitors alone should be able to spot major violations, even without the stations in Iran. And they will be backed up by other intelligence. The Administraton obviously needs to explain some aspects of the verification problem, but the main debate of the SALT treaty should probably not dwell for very long on the fear of cheating.

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